

FOLLOWING HUI SHEN

Hui Shen was a Buddhist monk from Afghanistan who is recorded in the Classical Chinese Records as having travelled with five companions to North America in 456 AD, wandered from what is now British Columbia to Mexico over a period of forty years, and returned to China in 496, where he told his story to court historians. His story has been translated and commented on by German and French scholars since the middle of the nineteenth century, but it was not treated seriously in North America until 1953. That is when Henrietta Mertz of Washington, D.C., published "Pale Ink", in which she traced what must have been the trail that Hui Shen followed, starting around Yellowknife, and following the eastern slopes of the Rockies all the way to Tula, Mexico, capital of the Toltec empire, where some believe that Quetzalcoatl, the Toltec god representing the forces of good and light, grew out of the legend of Hui Shen.

Gary Geddes is a distinguished Canadian poet much of whose work of the past 40 years has been inspired by his travels in South America, the Middle East, and Asia. He was in China twice in the 1980s as guest of the Chinese Writers' Association. I got to know Gary during the 20 years that he taught at Concordia University in Montreal.

Gary has been gathering materials about Hui Shen for twenty years. He knew that the monk was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, set off on his journey east by following the Silk Road to the East China Sea, and sailed from there to North America by following the northern land rim of the Pacific Ocean. But just last year Gary learned from Haida artist Michael Yaghulanaas that there was an ancient trail in the Queen Charlotte Islands alleged to have been constructed by a Chinese monk in the distant past, and that the trail was marked with old stone cairns. That meant that if Hui Shen spent some time in the Queen Charlotte Islands, he may have started his North American land journey by crossing the Rocky Mountains from what is now Prince Rupert. Gary, a B.C. native, got possessed by the story, and has managed to collect enough grant money to enable him to follow Hui Shen's trail.

He leaves for Kabul at the end of July, and plans to spend 10 weeks on the Silk Road. He will follow Hui Shen's voyage to North America next year, starting in the early spring by "hopping freighters" up the China coast, past Korea, Japan, the Kuril and Aleutian Islands to Prince Rupert. He has invited me to travel with him.

I believe it is the opportunity to make an extraordinary film about the discovery of a long-buried part of our collective past. There is a Haida scholar called Terry Glavin who believes that the physiognomy of west coast natives indicate that Hui Shen may have been only the last of many generations of Chinese sea travellers who settled on our west coast, and who became the forefathers of the west coast native people of today.

And there is a Chinese specialist on Hui Shen from Yunnan province (bordering on Burma) now teaching at the University of Massachusetts. His name is He Zhixiong. He will be spending a week with Gary on the Queen Charlotte Islands in early July. They

on the East China Sea, that could mean that he landed somewhere between southern Alaska and the mouth of the Columbia River.

There are some who believe that his landing place was Haida Gwaii, the Haida name for the Queen Charlotte Islands. That belief is based on a story passed on to the Haida sculptor Michael Nichol Yagulenaas by his grandfather, who claimed to have seen a trail of human-size stone cairns installed by Chinese monks on a mountain ridge overlooking Masset Inlet. They were used as markers to guide hunters on misty days. Human-size stone cairns were first installed and used as land markers in Tibet.

Assuming that Hui Shen crossed the Rockies via the Skeena River just east of Haida Gwaii, his report to Emperor Wu-Ti hints that he would have travelled south on the eastern slope of the Rockies on what is called the Old North Trail—a 25 km-wide stretch of land that First Peoples had used for 10,000 years as a corridor of travel between the Yukon and New Mexico. Ruts left by dog-pulled travois can still be found along that trail south of Lethbridge.

The fifth-century was at the centre of a golden age called the Classic Period in Mesoamerica. The Maya Indians were dominant. They possessed a system of hieroglyphic writing, an accurate calendar, and a knowledge of mathematics that included a symbol for zero. Hui Shen would have introduced advanced methods of agriculture, weaving, metallurgy and ceramics. Archeologist excavations since the 1930s have found sculptures from that period bearing Buddhist motifs, and buildings with corbelled roofs and arches in a Chinese style. Homes in Mexico are still being roofed with the same system of convex and concave tiles that has been used in China for countless centuries.

Some believe that native shamanism started in North America at the time of Hui Shen's visit. Others believe that the legend of Hui Shen was the origin of the Toltec god Quetzalcoatl, the « feathered serpent », or « respectful outsider ». There are Chinese pictographs on stone walls in Palenque, one of the principal cities of the Toltec Empire, which took over from the Mayas around 900 A.D..

Here are the people in B.C. who provided this information, three of whom I video-taped. They are all excellent potential film characters :

He Xhixiong, member of the Naxi minority in Yunnan Province, southern China, doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts. Author of a book published in Chinese last year which presents the history of scholarly studies of Hui Shen, starting with Joseph de Guignes in France in 1761 and climaxing with a rush of studies in China after the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. Ready to devote weeks next year camping on the Masset Inlet ridges until the stone cairns are found.

Grant Keddie, archeologist and curator at the Royal B.C. Museum in Victoria. Frustrated about government cut-backs that have increased his administrative load and diminished the time he feels he should devote to continuing his research on pre-Colombian

commercial and cultural relations between Asia and the Americas. A passionate advocate of the view that these relations have existed for 5000 years.

Guujaaw, President, Haida National Band Council, Skidegate, Haida Gwaii. His scepticism about Hui Shen represents the majority view of Indians of the northwest coast. They are reluctant to recognize any ancient Chinese presence because it would challenge their belief that they were the original and sole inhabitants of the coast before the arrival of the fur-traders.

Michael Nichol Yagulenaas, one of the growing number of Haida carvers who have benefitted from Bill Reid's breakthrough in the international art market, and who are able to survive on sales of their work at art galleries on the mainland without even having to leave Haida Gwaii. As the sole remaining carrier of his grandfather's story about the stone cairns, he is open to the Hui Shen story.

David Phillips, one of Haida Gwaii's more colourful personalities. An interior designer, he came to Masset 30 years ago to escape from the pretensions of wealth which surrounded his prominent Toronto family. With his bed and breakfast place that feels like a den of turn-of-the-century Pre-Raphaelites, and with his skills in producing meals as exquisite as anything in Paris or Tokyo, he has helped place Haida Gwaii on the tourist map. He has adopted Hui Shen as his god, ranks him as one of the five great religious prophets of all time, and credits him with introducing the Potlatch, the most important communal expression of Haida culture.

Ben Gould, maker of the most sublime 4x5 photos of whatever is left of the rain forest on Haida Gwaii; and his wife Rosie, gardener and hiker before she was immobilized in her early twenties by the fatigue syndrome. They were on a pre-nuptial hike on one of the ridges overlooking Masset Inlet 8 years ago when they got trapped by fog, and started looking desperately for the Chinese cairns. It is Rosie's dream to return to that ridge and find the cairns. She speaks about it with poetic beauty.

Gary is now on his way to Kabul as the starting point for his year-long trek. He will be following the northern Silk Road to Shanghai, arriving at the Yellow Sea at the end of October. He will do the trans-Pacific and North American portion of his tour starting next spring. At that time, he intends to (1) embark on vessels that plie the northern Pacific rim between Shanghai and Prince Rupert (he expects to find a shipping company that would arrange for this in return for acknowledgements in his book), (2) undertake a serious archeological search for the stone cairns on Haida Gwaii, (3) follow the Skeena River route by Volkswagen bus through the Rockies to Prince George and Lethbridge, (4) follow the Old North Trail to New Mexico, where the Navajos now occupy what used to be Mogollon territory, and are in a serious confrontation with mining companies over land rights around Big Mountain, and (5) stop in Palenque, Mexico, capital of the old Toltec Empire, and now on the edge of the Zapatista struggle in Chiapas.

The working title of Gary's book is « I Ching-Lu » (« The Spurious Sutras »). His intention is to examine the political and spiritual heritage of the descendants of the people

that Hui Shen would have met—the Haidas, the Tsimshians and Athapaskans in middle B.C., the Crees in Alberta, the Mogollons in New Mexico, the Mayans in Chiapas. He will talk to them, as Hui Shen would have, about their legends of origin, and he will search for the the historic sources of their political and cultural aspirations. He will be consulting with Harvey Ander and Steve Wale, authors of « Travels in a Stone Canoe » about how to contact the shamans they portray in that recent book. He already has a good contact in Chiapas.

The film I propose would cover the five stages of Gary's trip next year, with one week of shooting in each stage. (Is this a potential TV series of 5 half-hour or one-hour shows?) I have so far researched only stage (2) of that trip—Haida Gwaii. In order to research stage (1)—his ocean voyage from Shanghai—I should join Gary when he gets to Shanghai at the beginning of October this year. Then I should spend another three weeks checking locations and looking for characters in: (3) the Skeena River route across the Rockies to the Old North Trail near Lethbridge, (4) the border area of New Mexico and Arizona, around Big Mountain, and (5) Palenque, once the haven for hippies in search of the magic mushroom. Total: four more weeks of research, without mushrooms, followed by two weeks of writing, aiming for a completed script for January 1.

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